

# The William F. Buckley, Jr. Essay Contest 2012

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The William F.  
Buckley, Jr.  
Essay Contest  
**2012**

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*“What is more, truth can never win unless it is promulgated. Truth does not carry within itself an antitoxin to falsehood. The cause of truth must be championed, and it must be championed dynamically.*

- William F. Buckley, Jr. from *God and Man at Yale*

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The William F. Buckley, Jr. Program at Yale is a rapidly expanding organization that sponsors distinguished guest speakers and encourages intellectual diversity on campus. This booklet of student essays marks the Buckley Program's first foray into the world of publications and hopefully not the last. By opening the contest to students of all backgrounds, the Buckley Program wanted to prompt universal discussion on two important questions, particularly to American conservatives: where do the limits of liberty lie, and what is the status of our nation on the world stage as she marches into the 21st century?

As the coordinators of the Buckley Program Essay Prize Contest, we were delighted at the responses received. If we may be so bold as to label our participants, we collected essays from social conservatives to liberals and libertarians to statistes. While many worthy essays were submitted, our faculty judges chose eight essays that provide insightful and varying perspectives on timeless questions as well as matters of immediate political import. We hope you enjoy reading the essays. Our greatest hope is to bring to Yale the intellectual diversity that would make William F. Buckley, Jr. proud.

-Carter Reese & Alec Torres

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### WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY, JR. ESSAY CONTEST

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## CONTEST JUDGES

The following professors judged the essays selected for the competition:

Donald Kagan is the Sterling Professor of Classics and History at Yale University. Professor Kagan is a member of the William F. Buckley, Jr. Program Board of Directors. A distinguished author, Dr. Kagan has written numerous books on western civilization and Greek history. He is the winner of the National Humanities Medal for 2002.

Charles Hill, Distinguished Fellow of the Brady-Johnson Program in Grand Strategy, co-teaches the International Security Studies year-long seminar, “Studies in Grand Strategy”. A career foreign service officer, Mr. Hill was a senior adviser to George Shultz and Henry Kissinger. He also teaches a host of courses about literature, statecraft, history, and politics at Yale.

Professor Danilo Petranovich is a lecturer with the Yale Political Science department. His research has focused on the history of American political thought, with a special focus on American national culture and Abraham Lincoln as a nation-builder.

We selected two essay prompts to promote thoughts and ideas that are relevant in today's political environment. The first focuses on a classic quote from Edmund Burke, the 19th century political theorist and philosopher considered by many to be the founder of modern Conservatism. To introduce the concept that "Liberty must be limited in order to be possessed," one of our judges, Professor Charles Hill, has eloquently written an introduction explaining his views on this profound concept.

## CHARLES HILL

### "LIBERTY MUST BE LIMITED IN ORDER TO BE POSSESSED"

Americans have grappled with this Burkean idea since the days of the early Republic. Americans possess liberty as do no others and so have sought to understand its uses and responsibilities as well as the myriad of ways, direct or insidious, through which it can be taken away.

Freedom is for a people; liberty is for the individual. So if liberty must be limited in order to be possessed, it must be self-imposed in the recognition that certain limits are essential to making one's actions effective, intellectually coherent, and possessed of a certain beauty. As Robert Frost put it, "Free verse is like playing tennis without a net."

The main point of Washington's Farewell Address is that virtue is the necessary restraint upon liberty, and that religion is the best source of virtue. Tocqueville then observed that in America, uniquely, religion and liberty are compatible: Freedom sees religion as the cradle of its infancy and the divine source of its rights while Religion is the guardian and guarantee of the laws that preserve liberty.

But at the same time, American liberty has been endangered, from the time of the Puritans onward, by the American "passion for regulation." This, Toc-

queville predicted, eventually would enable government to extend its arms over society as a whole, to cover its surface "with a network of small, complicated, painstaking, uniform rules through which the most original minds and the most vigorous souls cannot clear a way."

There is a logic chain here: a lack of self-limitation on individual liberty will produce excess and coarseness; virtue will retreat and, as it does, hypocritical moralizing about society's wrongs will increase. Widening irresponsibility coupled with public pressure for behavior modification will mount and be acted upon eagerly by government. The loss of liberty scarcely will be noticed by the mass of people now indulging themselves in "small and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls." We will not as a result be ruled by tyrants but by schoolmasters and be consoled in the knowledge that we ourselves elected them.

To retain, or by now to repossession liberty, Americans must re-educate themselves in what has been made of Burke's precept – which Walt Whitman re-formulated as "The shallow consider liberty a release from all law, from every constraint. The wise man sees in it, on the contrary, the potent Law of Laws."

# 1<sup>st</sup> PLACE SAM COHEN

Calhoun '15 | History

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## The Limits of Liberty

Edmund Burke once wrote, “Liberty must be limited in order to be possessed.” That statement seems to run contrary to every value Americans hold dear. We treasure our freedoms of thought, speech, assembly and ideology as the quintessentially American values that make our country special and differentiate America from the other 195 countries in the world. If, however, one digs a little deeper, Burke’s wisdom — and lack of totalitarianism — becomes clear. He qualifies his statement, saying,

But it ought to be the constant aim of every wise public council to find out... with how little, not how much, of this restraint the community can subsist... and peace must, in the course of human affairs, be frequently bought by some indulgence and toleration at least to liberty: for ... [government should] not always to attempt violently to bend the people to their theories of subjection.

That qualification is important — Burke is not promoting a crackdown on freedom, but rather is advocating the gentlest possible regulation to prevent the pandemonium of anarchy. Liberty is not, as is widely believed, simply the freedom of whomever to do whatever whenever they wish. Instead, liberty is a responsibility. It is the cornerstone of the social contract, albeit a contract in which Burke did not believe, between a government and its citizenry: the government ensures stability and the people have the responsibility of choice in their lives and actions. To examine whether liberty must be limited in order to be possessed, it is helpful to examine a particular case of liberty. In the case of free speech, limits enhance and preserve liberty far more than the chaos of unregulated speech. In certain instances, censorship is not only thriving but necessary. The paradox of freedom of speech can be seen in Germany, Iraq, the United States, and China.

Germany and Iraq both have tumultuous histories and prominent dictators in their pasts — Adolf Hitler in Germany and Saddam Hussein in Iraq. To prevent a repetition of history and quell sympathizing sentiments, the Nazi and Ba’ath Parties have been banned in their respective countries. No swastikas may be displayed in Germany, under threat of prosecution. This ban is clearly government censorship, but it is not detrimental censorship; instead, it is the “little...restraint” that allows “the community to subsist.” History has shown the devastating effects of the ochlocracy of Nazism in the past, so if Germans care about the liberty of their country, they must limit the liberty of their fellow citizens to promote Nazi ideology. Similarly, the Ba’ath party is excluded from the political arena in Iraq. There, the disqualification of certain candidates with alleged ties to the Ba’ath party caused uproar and delayed an election until the dispute could be resolved. The Iraqi uproar shows the fine line that a government wishing to regulate possibly inflammatory speech must walk. In Iraq’s case, the government’s censorship

was too ham-handed and extensive to achieve its goal: the protection of responsible liberty for the citizenry of Iraq—basically, the social contract.

In the United States, the Supreme Court recently decided the famous *Citizens United* case in which the Court said that restrictions on corporation and union spending in elections was an infringement on their First Amendment rights. The Court ruled that the corporations and unions should be allowed to donate unlimited amounts of money to Super PACs that run advertisements during election campaigns, influencing the outcome of the election. These Super PACs are unaccountable and immensely powerful. Opponents of the Court's 5–4 decision argue that corporate speech is not included in the Constitution's protections of individual liberty. Though it may appear that the Court upheld the First Amendment, actually the roar of corporate cash is drowning out the speech of everyday Americans—limited government censorship, like the (now-gutted) McCain-Feingold campaign finance law, actually preserved the broader freedom of speech.

There are, of course, examples of censorship that are absolutely authoritarian government control. Last year, Google announced that elements of the Chinese government had hacked into Google servers to track down Chinese human rights activists. Google declared that unless China agreed to loosen Internet restrictions, Google would leave China. This announcement was remarkable, as China has the world's fastest growing market of Internet users—a market Google is obviously interested in exploiting. In response, China stated that if Google did not want to follow Chinese laws, Google should leave China. China's brazen disregard for the fundamental rights of its citizens is worrying—this instance was unequivocally government “attempt[ing] violently to bend the people to their theories of subjection,” something Burke agrees is reprehensible.

Freedom of speech in a modern society is truly a paradox. No longer can a government round up and burn books to suppress the ideas they contain; the Internet has made that obsolete. Yet it is important that the government retain some control over its citizens' freedoms. Unlimited liberty leads not to utopia, but to anarchy and eventually to the crushing slavery of dictatorship. The rule that differentiates appropriate government regulation from excessive limits on freedom is simple and based on mutual responsibility contained in the social contract: government has the right to restrict the actions of an individual only when those actions infringe on another individual's liberty. Specifically in the fight against censorship, we must be careful not to confuse totalitarian censorship (like China's “Great Firewall”) with tension-reducing censorship (like libel law). The first should be fought against at all costs, the latter considered more thoughtfully. Edmund Burke was right to say that limiting liberty allows a society to possess it—unrestrained discourse in places like Germany or Iraq could have the eventual effect of restraining speech far more than any gentle government regulation.



# 2<sup>nd</sup> PLACE CASEY SUMNER

Ezra Stiles '13 | Humanities

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## David Hume and the Liberty of the Moderns

Aristotle's *Politics* is refreshing in how directly it asks basic political questions. The regime forms the central point of inquiry, and he speaks of political liberty in the most straightforward way: those who do and do not possess political authority. "Who governs?" he wants to know. In his inquiry, he shrewdly demonstrates that compromises of authority necessarily ensure stability and the rule of law, the basic demands of political freedom. But for all of Aristotle's analysis, as modern readers we cannot help but feel distant from the *Politics*. By any reckoning, Aristotle's analysis reflects social, political, and economic realities that are radically different from the society in which we live. We wish to understand different societies so that we may gain insights into our own, but the task is a difficult one. What truly was the liberty of the ancients as compared with that of the moderns? And what does this tell us about our own liberty, about its character and limitations?

To engage in this inquiry, we might consider a figure who, in his own lifetime, straddled both worlds. The Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume lived in the last century of *Ancien Régime*, just as the political and intellectual climate of Europe was showing signs of tumult that would dominate the next two centuries. In many respects, his thought prefigures those changes, and his insights are all the more acute for his ability to contrast the virtue of the old system with that of the new.

To start, Hume was no admirer of the ancients. Certain ancient cities, as he argues in his *Essays*, achieved remarkable feats of communal identity and martial discipline, and these efforts preserved both political liberty and the seeds of civilization (II.I.7-8). But the rule of law was always less secure among the ancients, and even the worst European monarchs of Hume's day paled before the despotism of Nero, Domitian, or any number of Greek tyrants (I.XII.12). At its worst, the old regime fostered only ignorance and cruelty, with a political culture characterized by tyranny, oppressive taxation of the poor, and the destructive feuding of nobles (II.II.16).

The difference, then, between Hume's age and the ancients, and between

our age and both, is the rise of commerce. The worst abuses of the old system, he argues, tend to occur in the most rigidly hierarchical agrarian economies; but the rise of commerce and industry, along with a prosperous middle class, slowly siphons power from the aristocracy and broadens the tax base, which alleviates some of the crushing burden on the peasants (II.I.17). The middle class has something to protect, so they are not prone to radicalism. And despite this, they are too diffuse to seek despotic power in the way an aristocrat does. So it is with this modern middle class that Hume entrusts our liberty (II.II.16).

But his analysis runs deeper. The rise of commerce promises to civilize us, to give us new values. The ties of trade make nations mutually wealthier, not more hostile, and thus less likely to fight one another (II.I.15). The growth of industry also fosters the sort of wealth that increases demand for art and education, enhancing our learning along with our wealth (II.I.17). Hume goes further still – this new commercial society needs new values to animate it. A modern state can never hope to instill Sparta’s discipline and sense of communal identity; we are too populous, too diffuse, and too ideologically mixed to ever share those values. Instead, Hume identifies self-interest, and specifically avarice, as a new political motivator (II.I.13). Avarice appeals to passions felt by the majority, rather than the few, and it rouses those in the majority from idleness to industry, which in turn increases the prosperity of the whole society (II.I.13).

So with a conservative, self-interested middle class possessing the greater part of political power, faction will be less bloody and oppression less onerous. At root, this seems to imply that the basic question of political rule, “who governs?” and all the attending compromises, will be less important. When questions of power and stability are less important, society can cultivate wealth, education, and the arts. Therein, ultimately, lies our true liberty. Commerce and the market promise freedom from tyranny, feuding nobles, rebellious serfs, and all the perpetual ills of poverty, ignorance, and despotism that seemed to plague the old world and that only a few ancient *poleis*, with great effort, managed to escape.

That is the positive view, at least. But Hume, like many of his contemporaries, is not without reservation. One sees this perhaps most acutely in his essay on public credit. In his view, the emergence of public finance – that is, the sale of public bonds – is an inevitable consequence of the commercial society (II.IX.2). The promise of purchasing things now and paying for them later is politically irresistible and, in practical terms, inevitable.

But what happens when the money comes due? The problem is the rise of a wealthy creditor class holding public bonds, a group whom Hume describes with the profound distaste that the ancients reserved for usurers (II.IX.23).

A monarch can simply default if he deems it necessary; but a popular parliament, with its ties to the creditor class, may find default politically unacceptable (II.IX.30). Paying these creditors requires increasing the burden of taxation to rapacious levels, and this only exhausts our wealth, saps our resources, and substitutes our liberty for the tyrannical avarice of a creditor class (II.IX.31-32).

The problem is essentially a political one, and Hume sees it as an inevitable danger of the commercial society. The result is that, despite commerce's claims to make us free and civilized, we are never quite so far from the basic compromises of power, stability, and political rule as we imagine – nor is the world of Aristotle as distant as we would hope.

Hume, David, *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*. Eugene F. Miller, ed. 1987. Library of Economics and Liberty. 31 March 2012. <<http://www.econlib.org/library/LFBooks/Hume/hmMPL.html>>

# 3<sup>rd</sup> PLACE NICHOLAS GEISER

## Branford '13 | Philosophy

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### The Virtues of Liberty

**L**iberty must be restrained to be possessed, Burke tells us, because without restraint liberty possesses us. Liberty without restraint is incontinence and evokes our worst desires, while liberty with discipline permits the fullest realization of human virtue. Liberty allows virtue to stand alone, without the crutch of paternalism, recognizable as our own and not another's, but it also allows us to sink from grace.

Liberty and virtue are both goods. The virtues are simply the praiseworthy qualities of man. And a world with more liberty is superior to a world with less liberty, all other things being equal. A world with less subjugation to arbitrary will, with less coercion, is a morally better place than one with more.

Yet liberty and virtue are not the same simply because are both good. Burke and other exponents of "positive liberty" tell us that liberty is properly only the liberty to do what is good for us. Liberty to do vice is no liberty at all, he claims; in fact, it is slavery. This analysis has deeply confused what liberty actually means and what makes it different from everything else, with dangerous consequences.

Liberty, or "negative liberty" to be consistent, is the freedom from another's will or coercion. We do not need to ask whether a virtuous, or just outcome obtains to say whether liberty is present. Instead, we say that liberty distinguishes itself from license – the mere power or ability to act as I will. My own actions may be good or virtuous, but liberty instead describes the state of my relationship with other agents and whether they in fact can restrain or coerce me. Negative liberty must certainly be restrained to be equally possessed by each subject in a relationship of liberty. My liberty to swing my fist ends when it violates your liberty to dispose of your cheek.

Treating liberty as it is reveals liberty's natural promise and its natural limits. Liberty arises from the fundamental separateness of persons. It acknowledges that while we depend on one another, while we are inevitably side by side, our lives' pursuits nonetheless remain irreducibly our own. I cannot step on a stranger's toe, not only because of the harm it produces, or prudential consideration, or divine command, but also because the stranger may justly reproach me as one man to another and demand I acknowledge

his liberty to dispose of his toe as he would, not as I would.

But liberty is not constituted in living a praiseworthy or ennobled life, or in exercising virtue. That is not liberty—it is living a praiseworthy and noble life. Burke calls on us to dignify our liberty in pursuit of virtue. He appeals to our aspirational nature. We desire not just to be free, but to employ freedom in the service of ennobling projects. We wish to be recognized – to participate in shared honors that transcend our narrow individuality. We wish not just to be ourselves, but to be our best selves and share our strengths with others. If liberty preserves the individual's separateness, virtue wishes to transcend it.

Virtue, then, cannot properly be freedom. By treating liberty in the service of virtue as a higher form of liberty than mere non-coercion, we risk abrogating the very non-coercion liberty originally protects. In the political realm, it gives reason to bully others into realizing their higher, latent selves, because we supposedly extend their freedom. Mere non-interference becomes a confusion of the term “freedom” to be overcome. And in the name of the noble or the good, we would have reason to harm and coerce.

We have learned from experience that political language can have terrible consequences. A century and a half after Burke's admonition, George Orwell warned us that “political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable.” Liberty is just liberty and not virtue, or justice, or power, or solidarity, or any of the concepts invoked under the auspices of “positive liberty.” Liberty and virtue must inevitably and unhappily conflict, for liberty extends to the vicious just as to the virtuous. But to pretend otherwise, to dissolve an indissoluble conflict of values, invites a cure worse than the disease.

# Honorable Mention Annie Wang

## Berkeley '13 | Political Science

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### Where are the Anarchists?

It seems fair to say, at least in America, all of mainstream politics has conceded that government is necessary, that it has some legitimate role, and that it is not going anywhere. Far from challenging Burke's claim that "liberty must be limited in order to be possessed," modern political discourse has embraced this claim. Even libertarian Ron Paul, the most extreme politician with any kind of national following, grudgingly acknowledges that the federal government has a legitimate claim to regulate, at the least, national defense and domestic security. From this perspective, the schism between liberals and conservatives is no more than a quibble over the margins of Burke's claim: we argue over *how much* liberty to concede, but no one suggests that we should not do so at all.

But what is this liberty that we are all so desperate to defend? One obvious candidate is the liberty of the body, the guarantee of safety and security. I am neither arrogant nor naïve enough to deny that man is a creature of conflict and that the state of nature—a state of war, if Hobbes has it correct—is a deeply unpleasant place. Hence, I accept that the state's coercive force may guarantee my security, and that in surrendering the liberty of my body, I gain the freedom to act.

This liberty, however, is hardly the only type, and to focus on this liberty, the liberty of the body, is insufficient to understand the full repercussions of the state. There exists a form of liberty for which Burke's claim does not hold, for which repression is simply repression, and for which the establishment of the state does only harm.

I refer here to the liberty of conscience: the freedom to think, to feel, and to speak as one pleases, free from unsolicited external influence. From the very moment of the state's creation, it is this liberty that comes under threat, for the freedom of conscience is incompatible with the demands of citizenship. This is the great problem of the liberal state: in the name of protecting liberty (that is, both types of liberty) the state must allow citizens to challenge every value except the value of liberty and the value of the state itself. In its attempt to sustain liberty, the state necessarily threatens it.

This threat is particularly evident in modern democracies, which proclaim themselves the strongest protectors of individual conscience while simultaneously placing the greatest demands upon it. On a fundamental level, the justification for democracy presumes a civic-minded citizenry: why bother with self-rule if no one is inter-

ested? On a procedural level, democracy requires a civic-minded citizenry: what is the source of political legitimacy if no one is engaged? Unlike autocratic leaders who can engage in coercive force, democratic leaders must defend their rule in an environment where political opponents are waiting in the wings. Hence, democratic leaders rely on public support, which presumes a level of involvement and investment in the political process. The development of civic values, then, becomes an existential need. A democratic society cannot survive unless it convinces enough citizens to share its values and to be engaged in the political process. The state thus has a vested interest (or, at the very least, a strong incentive) to violate the liberty of conscience.

And it does so. In America, we see that the government adopts a variety of policies to inculcate civic values. Public school teachers, for example, lead their students in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance every morning. Before they even know how to read, six year-olds swear their loyalty “to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands.” Before the idea of a republic is even fully understood, students are taught to associate their country with their form of government and to value both as a form of civic devotion. For adults, federal and state governments routinely sponsor parades and commission displays to celebrate local or national history. An entire federal agency, the National Endowment for the Humanities, exists to fund activities that “serve and strengthen our Republic by ... conveying the lessons of history to all Americans.” At all levels, our liberal, democratic government attempts to cultivate the type of citizen that it requires.

For all that we may value democracy, we cannot ignore the threat that it poses to our liberty. As John Stuart Mill eloquently argued, “[society] practices a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since ... it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life and enslaving the soul itself.” Although democratic states cannot *command* their subjects’ loyalty, their need to form those sentiments invariably leads to these invisible forms of persuasion. This socialization begins the moment we are born a citizen of the state but before the moment we become aware of what that means.

Why are there no anarchists in American politics? They have been necessarily marginalized, necessarily *socialized* from the mainstream. Over the course of our education, we have learned to justify the existence of the state in the name of liberty – the liberty of physical security – and to take any steps necessary to secure that existence. The problem is that when we do so, we conflate the liberty of the body with the liberty of conscience, and we are so confident in the state’s protection of the former, we overlook the harm it inflicts on the latter. Certainly, reasonable people can disagree on whether this intrusion onto our liberty is worth it – whether the violation of our conscience is justifiable or even necessary – but to have this discussion, we must first notice the violation. We must notice the danger that we have created and imposed upon ourselves. And for that, we need a few more anarchists.

The second prompt derives from current debate on the state of our nation as we face new and unprecedented economic and foreign policy challenges. Conservatives even disagree on American decline: Mark Steyn predicts the death of Western Civilization in his recent book *After America*, while Robert Kagan argues decline is a myth in *The World America Made*. The debate over declinism is apt to continue throughout this election year and the following essays highlight the various opinions on this subject.

## CARTER REESE

# AMERICAN DECLINE

The question of whether or not the United States is in decline is discussed rampantly on the global and domestic stage. Yet if the true conservative values of capitalism, family, liberty, and individualism are restored, there is no doubt that these questions will be answered with a resounding no.

Global terrorism is a new phenomenon of the 21st century that has drained American resources, but the defeat of Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, and Muammar Gaddafi mark progress in the war on terror. Iran is now the most dangerous security threat facing the United States and our ally Israel, with growing talk of a military strike on their nuclear sites by the Pentagon or the Israeli Defense Force. China and Russia aggressively assert their power, and China is on a path to overtake the US economically. The rejection of democratic values by these countries does not bode well for the United States.

Domestically, the American family is undergoing dramatic changes and government policies must attempt to strengthen this key social structure. Both political parties have spent too much while entitlements desperately need reform; yet reasonable plans for reform and debt reduction are not advanced in a partisan Congress. Congress's approval ratings are under ten percent, and a majority of Americans

disapprove of President Obama's signature piece of legislation—the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. Movements like the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street advocate for solutions at both ends of the political spectrum, contributing to the growing polarization of the nation instead of advancing a productive conversation.

Despite these problems, there are reasons to believe that the United States will remain Lincoln's "last best hope of earth." The problems of today pale in comparison to events in American history like the American Revolution, the Civil War, or the struggle for civil rights. With strong leadership and a new devotion to the ideals defined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, our nation can overcome our global and domestic challenges. As President Reagan explained in his farewell address, "I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity." With the values that have made us great and strong, we must work together to build that city for the good of our country.



# 1<sup>st</sup> PLACE JAKE MCKENZIE

TD '12 | Economics & International Studies

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## American Decline: An Overblown Obsession

The question of American decline has lately transfixed our public discourse. No one has made this more clear than President Obama himself, who argued in this year's State of the Union address that "anyone who tells you that America is in decline or that our influence has waned doesn't know what they're talking about." Obama's critics contend that the administration's own foreign policy is timid and displays this very same notion of "declinism." Meanwhile, the opinion pages of leading newspapers and journals continue to expound on the political, economic, demographic, and historical dimensions of this sensitive question.

The intensity of the debate masks the fact that the issues at hand are somewhat poorly defined. It is difficult to establish whether or not the United States is in a state of decline when there is no consensus as to the symptoms of this supposed decline. No serious American author even argues (publicly at least) that America is in fact on an inevitable path of decline. Those accused of promoting this "declinism" are often labeled as such by their opponents, not for their own espousal of this view.

However you define decline, most tangible metrics would suggest we are not facing it. America has the largest economy in the world, which, despite the current downturn, will continue to grow. We do not face demographic disaster like Europe and Japan. We possess the world's most powerful and sophisticated military. We are blessed with a favorable geographic location, abundant wealth, the world's most innovative private sector, and an engrained culture of entrepreneurship.

The debate over American decline hinges on something more nebulous. We are at risk, or not at risk, of a decline in American *influence*. Paul Kennedy and Fareed Zakaria speak of the coming multi-polar world. Richard Cohen laments Obama's failure to contain Iran's nuclear ambitions and his failure to overcome Russian and Chinese intransigence on Syria. Robert Kagan is more optimistic, arguing that the heralds of America's decline are unwarranted and that America will continue to play an instrumental role in shaping the democratic world order of the 21st century.

But ultimately, reducing any of these arguments to the question of *inevitability* is misguided. What we need – and what most of the writing about American decline seems to be missing – is a frank discussion of the choices we face. Do we have the capacity to meet the next century's strategic challenges? How should we prioritize among and address the major problems facing our nation?

Our country faces significant tests in the coming decades. First are the twin threats facing the domestic economy: our government is deeply in debt and our country runs a huge trade deficit. In foreign affairs, we face a shifting status quo in the Middle East with uncertain outcomes. Meanwhile, China's growing economic clout will increase its influence in world politics. To confront these challenges, America must remain dedicated to the ideals that have always made us strong: an unflinching commitment to peace, liberal democracy, and the values of free market capitalism.

# 2<sup>nd</sup> PLACE MICHAEL MAGDZIK

## Berkeley '13 | Political Science

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### Strength in World Freedom

In 1821, John Quincy Adams said in reference to the United States of America, “Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own.”

In many ways, America has run away from this notion. In World War II, we proudly fought the Nazi Germany on the beaches of Normandy and throughout Europe, sending a resounding message that domination and subjugation by force of arms was contrary to American principles. In the Cold War, we challenged the Communist model of governance, with all its corruption, abuse, and desecration of the individual. In the 21st century, we have fought a War on Terror that has severely drained our resources and taxed our spirits, leading many to believe that we are in an era of inevitable decline. Many say China is destined to eclipse the United States.

But the decline of the United States will never be inevitable so long as its ideals persevere, and persevere they have. All around the world, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, people are waking up and realizing the profound and beautiful nature of the American promise of uncorrupted democracy, accountable and tightly checked governance, and lasting freedom. From Tunisia to Myanmar and from Libya to Iran, from Syria to China and even in the old authoritarian stronghold of Russia, brave men and women are affirming fundamentally American principles. These freedoms originated in America, were spread around the world by America, and continue to be championed by America even as other countries embrace them.

In this sense, the American notion of liberty has more pervasively permeated into the intellectual fiber of political leaders and elites than any other in history. Our institutions and laws are adopted in the spirit of brotherhood with America. Even if our economic star is destined to fade relative to Brazil, India, or any other country, we can proceed secure in the knowledge that our method of maintaining consistent and steady alli-

ances and our defense of everything that is good and right in the international arena guarantees us lasting friendships and respect.

Even with diminished military capacity we will be first among a circle of fellows on the world stage – a circle that continually marginalizes and pressures rogue nations who refuse to play by the rules we created – the North Koreans and Irans of the world.

We only need to keep as our guiding principle the words of President Kennedy – “Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty.” Liberty thrives in countries around the world today and it will continue to grow in the future with the United States as its flagship. In that sense, the United States has never declined in the first place.

# 3<sup>rd</sup> PLACE CHRIS PAGLIARELA

## Berkeley '12 | Political Science & AfAm Studies

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### A Broken Building Block

In a twenty-four hour news media culture, journalists often seek small controversies to catch the public eye and help fill a news cycle. During the 2008 presidential campaign, then-Senator Obama briefly faced accusations that he was secretly resolved to the decline of the United States of America. The evidence? A photograph of the Senator clutching Fareed Zakaria's *The Post-American World*. Though Zakaria does not emphasize the objective decline of the United States in the text, he suggests that "the rise of the rest" will come to constrain America's global power in a comparative context.

From the perspective of political pundits like Zakaria, the power of a nation is often weighed on a geopolitical and macroeconomic scale. Yet this unit of measurement encourages us to focus primarily on the actions and interactions of large institutions (the financial actors, for example) with distinct policies that may be altered. It does not focus on the building blocks underpinning society as a whole, where trends are not so easily shifted. When discussing the potential decline of the United States, we must consider the persistently declining strength of the smallest foundational unit of society: the family.

Recently, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks wrote an article called, "The Talent Society," which opens by discussing recent studies showing that over half of all children born to women under thirty in the United States are born outside of marriage. Brooks frames this shift within the context of increased flexibility in social roles and expectations. He believes that this flexibility, combined with increased access to information technology, enables the most talented to exercise their gifts more completely. Yet as a conservative, Brooks sees the danger in the breakdown of social structures that, in another era, provided consistent support for the most vulnerable of society:

Today, the fast flexible and diverse networks allow the ambitious and the gifted to surf through amazing possibilities... On the other hand, people who lack social capital are more likely to fall through the cracks... Over all, we've made life richer for the people who have the social capital to create their own worlds. We've also made it harder for the people who don't — especially poorer children.

Through this lens, we can see fully enjoyed independence as a sort of unwitting selfishness; the social bonds from which "the ambitious and the gifted" have been freed were not arbitrary chains, but contracts that would have required them to set aside their own passions and assure the well-being of those for whom true independence means near-certain failure.

As the Republican primaries began this year, conservative columnist Suzanne Fields

wrote a critique of the Obama administration's domestic policy entitled, "Is America In Decline?" Fields claims President Obama desires "to fundamentally transform the United States from a nation of limited government to a welfare society dependent on government whim," and she declares, "It's a recipe for decline." To hear columnists like Fields tell the story, liberals have created dependency where no real need existed. Yet few suggest that the primary problem with welfare expenditure is pervasive fraud, or that beneficiaries of government handouts could care for themselves just as well without assistance. Rather, we have a government behaving paternalistically in the absence of real parents, acting as Big Brother in the absence of big brothers.

This problem is not merely one of creeping statism, but one of practical impossibility. During W.E.B. DuBois's early twentieth-century study of black churches in the South, he surveyed numerous parishioners on their attitudes toward their Sunday Schools, where instructors often taught basic literacy and other practical skills as well as theological lessons. Reading his interviews on the perceived efficacy of the schools' teachings, one parent's comment stands out, "[The Sunday school's] ineffectiveness... is due to the lack of those in the home more than to the teaching. The hour... out of 168 does not do effectively what the 167... hours have failed to do, or undo what they have done."

Though mandatory public school has extended the hours during which the state acts as guardian, we still see the surpassing impact that parental involvement has in childhood achievement. Take the example of two preschool programs in Chicago: Head Start and Child-Parent Centers. Both served students of the same economic background, in the same neighborhoods, with teachers of similar qualifications for the same periods of time. Yet the program that required parental involvement once a month showed significantly greater student improvement in behavior and academic achievement—an advantage that studies suggest persisted throughout high school.

Recently, I attended a funeral mass for an aunt of mine who had suffered from cancer for years. The atmosphere, though solemn, resembled a family reunion; many relatives who were barely connected to my aunt were in attendance to pay their respects and to offer aid, material and emotional, to those left behind. I reflected then about how blessed I am to not only have a strong immediate family, but many intact family units across my extended relations that I can count on for assistance at any time: layers upon layers of security and support. If the single intact family unit is becoming a minority arrangement, families like mine represent a dying breed.

To claim that the breakdown of the nuclear and extended family renders decline inevitable necessitates a prophetic talent that I do not claim to have. Still, while it is true that government has the power to weaken or strengthen cultural institutions—after all, many claim that government welfare policies helped undermine marriage in the first place—it seems unlikely that so dramatic a trend can be reversed merely through state action. Yet such almost-futile work may provide our only hope; for believing that the government alone—distant, bureaucratic, overstretched, dependent on shifting political sentiment—could somehow replace the role of the family feels purely impossible.

# Honorable Mention Shashwat Udit

## Silliman '12 | Applied Physics & Economics

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### A Lost Society

One of the strongest arguments for American exceptionalism is how difficult it is to use the evidence of history to answer this question. History teaches us that every empire, regardless of its military power or the wisdom of its leadership, eventually ends. Fortunately, America is a republic, not an empire. It consists primarily of its citizenry, not the territory patrolled and defended by its military. And history has also taught us that while empires end, the people living in them tend to endure.

This is why it is wrong to speak of American decline as the inevitable result of the rise of emerging markets, especially in Asia. It is true that the Asian economies are growing, and, in comparison, American power is declining. Nevertheless, a decline in American relative power is not the same as American decline. The greatness of the United States is not a result of American power. To the contrary, the greatness has always been the result of the internal strength of the American system – power is merely a byproduct. There are many security and economic issues related to China's rise and we should be concerned about them, but the Politburo cannot change America's national identity. Only Americans can do that.

The good news is that the American system has never been stronger. No longer is our belief in the inherent rights of the individual marred by such barbarities as slavery and the destruction of the Native Americans. The American system of democracy is no longer encumbered by widespread election fraud, smoke-filled rooms of the party elite who decide nominations, or disenfranchisement. The triumph of meritocracy over hereditary privilege is closer to being fully realized than ever before thanks to widespread access to higher education, financial aid, and the opening of the previously WASP dominated establishment to women, minorities, and recent immigrants. However, a strong system is not enough. What goes into the system – the culture, the ideals, the aspirations of the public – matters as well.

The application of this idea to the promotion of democracy abroad is so common as to be trite: everyone knows that one cannot simply write a constitution, hold elections, and expect a mature stable republic to result. One must build institutions, civil society must gain popular support, and so on. These are not issues in the United States. While there is no lack of commitment to the American system, there has been a decline in civic virtue, the commitment to making the system work well.

Civic virtue is a nebulous concept, but my favorite depiction of it comes from John F. Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage*, with its profiles of six U.S. senators who knowingly destroyed their political careers by voting for what they thought was in the Republic's best interests. The ideal that the public interest should be placed ahead of private ambition was widely accepted among the American elite of the time. Men of privilege and Ivy League students regularly volunteered for military service and paused their careers at white-shoe firms or management of their family fortunes in order to work in public service. Some of this spirit even spilled into their business dealings. Businessmen like Sidney Weinberg and Marvin Bower were well known for their integrity, sometimes sacrificing clients and fees in order to tell the truth. Some of this may seem trivial, but if civic virtue had been absent the United States would probably not be the great nation it is today. For example, John Adams rightly decided to make peace with France at the expense of his re-election bid. Likewise, Abraham Lincoln continued backing General Ulysses Grant's military campaign in Virginia with its high casualties despite thinking it would cost him the presidency.

We shouldn't over-idealize the past. Corruption and venality were just as common in the elites of the past as integrity and statesmanship – the rapacity of old political machines and robber barons was legendary. However, we have changed our ideals. We have made American society much more meritocratic in the past few generations by finally making opportunities available to women, minorities, and people born into disadvantaged backgrounds. The problem is that we forgot to actually define merit. We simply assume we have a meritocracy, and the people that rise to the top are the most deserving. In doing so, we make the highest virtue not out of virtue but success, and the second highest virtue out of ambition. There is no place for self-sacrifice in the public interest in this new order. After all, in a system where the worthy win, the most disgraceful thing you can do is to lose.

The American elite has taken this message of success or shame to heart. Our politicians are relentlessly focused on their re-election campaigns. They spend their time fundraising, all the while avoiding powerful interest groups and contentious issues. Media outlets often put the ratings wars above the public interest. Members of the legal and financial professions often give advice that better serves to increase their firms' profits rather than to serve their clients' wellbeing. Even the medical profession lobbies against efforts to reduce health care costs. The result of this relentless pursuit of self-interest among the American elite is what one would expect – the rich grow dramatically richer while the poor and middle class become poorer. The big problems like global warming, the deficit, and unemployment remain unsolved while we have over-litigated and over-speculated ourselves into financial crisis and declining global competitiveness; more and more people predict the inevitable decline of America. If the culture among our best and brightest does not change to one that places a higher importance on the nation's well-being, they may even be right that decline is inevitable.



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